DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 381 634 CE 068 726

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TITLE What Minnesota Secondary Learners Require of Schools. Report of Work Group Discussions. Town Meeting (Spring 1993).
INSTITUTION Minnesota State Council on Vocational Technical Education, St. Paul.
PUB DATE 94
NOTE 15p.; For the report on postsecondary learners, see CE 068 727.
AVAILABLE FROM State Council on Vocational Technical Education, 366 Jackson Street, Suite 314, St. Paul, MN 55101 (alternate formats such as large print or cassette tape available upon request).
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Career Choice; Education Work Relationship; Goal Orientation; High Schools; High School Students; Relevance (Education); Statewide Planning; Student Attitudes; Student Educational Objectives; *Student Needs; *Success; Vocational Education
IDENTIFIERS *Minnesota

ABSTRACT

Nearly 70 people from across Minnesota attended a meeting on the topics, "What Secondary Learners Require of Schools." High school and postsecondary students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, community organization representatives, and business people participated. Following an opening session, participants separated into five student and two adult teams. In three sessions, work teams discussed concerns that young people face today and in the future, what students feel they need in order to be successful, and what they want and need from school. Major themes that emerged were as follows: economic growth and occupational outlook, academic and occupational choices, need for real-life applicable choices, need for basic skills and lack of transferable skills, concern about social issues and other problems, family living, self-care and self-esteem, defining success, direct involvement of administration with students, teachers who want to teach, keeping up with technology, and depending on others. These themes paralleled those from the town meeting held during the summer of 1988. (YLB)

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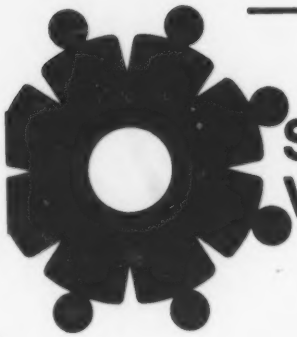

State Council on Vocational Technical Education

STATE OF MINNESOTA

WHAT MINNESOTA SECONDARY LEARNERS REQUIRE OF SCHOOLS

Report of Work Group Discussions

Town Meeting
Spring 1993

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Spring 1993

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Acknowledgements

The Council extends its appreciation to the secondary school students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, community organization representatives, and business people from across the State of Minnesota whose contributions are contained in the following report. The Council must also acknowledge its sincere debt of gratitude to the facilitators who led the focus groups and recorded the comments of the participants.

This report will be made available in alternate format, such as large print or cassette tape, upon request.

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INTRODUCTION

Nearly 70 people from across Minnesota attended the State Council on Vocational Technical Education's **1993 Town Meeting**. The meeting, held in St. Paul on April 20, 1993, featured the topic, "What Secondary Learners Require of Schools." Participating were high school and postsecondary students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, community organization representatives and business people.

The 19 female and 10 male high school students, from 12 schools across the state, were accompanied by 19 (adult) school personnel. The students represented diverse ethnic backgrounds and, as a group, averaged 17.3 years old and reported an average grade point of 3.17 on a 4.0 scale. Almost all the high school students held some kind of employment outside of school and all reported expectations of pursuing postsecondary education following graduation. A majority said they planned to attend a four-year institution, while only seven students cited a technical or community college as part of their future plan.

Participants attended an initial morning opening session which focused on:

1) Report of the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS)
2) Outcome-based education/graduation rule
3) Overview of "What Do Students Want and Need?"
4) The new generation of young people
5) The value of the town meeting
6) That young people as well as adults will be asked the same questions during the day, finishing with, "When was the last time you were asked these questions?"

Following the opening session, participants separated into five student and two adult teams. The teams were facilitated by one or two people who had previously attended a training session specifically for the town meeting. The training session emphasized fostering an open discussion without interfering with content. The training session also had focused on the specific questions to be asked during the student and adult teams sessions. In the three sessions, work teams discussed independently the following three primary questions:

Session One: What are some of the concerns young people face today and in the future, and how do these concerns affect your future?

Session Two: What do you think/feel that you need to be successful?

Session Three: What do you want and need from school?

Work team sessions closed with the question, "When were you last asked these questions?"

Finally, participants met again as a full group to discuss the outcomes of each team discussion. Team facilitators briefly reported the highlights of their respective sessions.

What follows are the major themes that emerged from responses within the work teams. Responses have been summarized in an attempt to capture the spirit of a cluster of similar comments. The statements were written to reflect the overall perspective and attitude of the participants, if not their actual language. Due to the similarities in the themes and specific comments generated by the two adult work groups, their contributions to the statements in this report are included without further attribution.

RESULTS

ECONOMIC GROWTH AND OCCUPATIONAL OUTLOOK

1. We are concerned about what the economy and job outlook will be like in the future. What if we graduate from high school and can't find a job? What if we spend several years in college preparing for a career and then can't get a job? Nothing guarantees that we will secure employment.

   - Most of us don't know what kind of jobs will be in demand when we graduate from high school or from college. We're not sure what kind of a job we'd be able to get with a high school diploma or even with various college degrees. For example, what types of occupations are liberal arts, psychology, or

"We need more answers because, the fact is, we just don't know what it is that we don't know!"

mathematics graduates qualified to do? We need more answers because, the fact is, we just don't know what it is that we don't know!

- Many of us aren't sure what to do after graduating from high school. We aren't aware of our options and need more career exploration and guidance assistance before reaching high school. All of a sudden we're in high school and are expected to know what we want to do for the rest of our lives. Up to this point, though, little information has been given to us about careers and life choices.

ACADEMIC AND OCCUPATIONAL CHOICES

2. We don't know what our academic and occupational choices are. How do we choose a college? A career? Counselors are helpful when available, but they're usually too busy to spend much time with any one student, and we get little career information elsewhere.

NEED FOR REAL-LIFE APPLICABLE COURSES

3. The school system exists primarily to serve students who plan on going to college. We need real-life classes that will benefit all students, regardless of future plans. Course content needs to be interesting and may also need restructuring.

"We need real-life courses that will benefit all students, regardless of future plans . . . The high school curriculum seems to be designed to push everyone into college."

- We shouldn't have just a set amount of time to learn one chapter, test on that material and, then go on to the next chapter—even if we haven't learned the material. We should be able to learn at our own pace, test on the material, and move on when we're ready or spend more time on it if needed.

- Many of us want to take more vocational classes, but we can't, either because of time restrictions or because few such courses are available. These classes may not specifically prepare us

for higher education, but they do prepare us for life.

- The high school curriculum seems to be designed to push everyone into college. The fact is that not all of us will go to college. Many students who do attend college following high school drop out, and then what? We definitely need more job preparation classes.

- A lot of us want more hands-on courses. We don't want to read about something, we want to experience it! Students should be given opportunities to experience the real world. Learning shouldn't be limited to classrooms and out-of-date text books.

NEED FOR BASIC SKILLS AND WANT FOR TRANSFERRABLE SKILLS

4. Sure, we need reading, writing, and math, but we also want transferrable skills that will help us find a good job someday. That requires knowing how to fill out job applications, write cover letters, develop resumes, and interview for positions. These skills may stem from the basics, but we also need specific information.

- Students need to learn skills that can be transferred from job to job. We are seeking a "knowledge bank" that can take us to where new jobs might be.

- It is important to learn, along with basic skills, how to manage time. In high school it already seems as if there is so much to do and so little time to do it. What will happen when we are responsible for families in addition to work? Will we have time for a social life and other activities? How should we plan for and manage all these things? We need to learn about balancing these things now before we actually take on adult responsibilities.

- In addition to basic skills, without which we couldn't do anything, we need higher-order thinking skills, such as the ability to make good decisions. We need the skill of how to learn, not that of memorizing something long enough to be tested on it, only to forget it soon after.

- We also need—besides lots of different skills—a safe, tolerant environment in which to practice and share learned skills with our peers and teachers. We need the opportunity to <u>share</u> skills.

CONCERN ABOUT SOCIAL ISSUES AND OTHER PROBLEMS

5. So many problems appear in and around our schools everyday—drug use, violence, and guns—not to mention less visible things such as AIDS, teen pregnancy, and other social concerns.

   - Students should be exposed more often to social programs, addressing, for instance, violence—how to prevent it and what to do if we happen to confront it. Where do we go for help?

FAMILY LIVING

6. Many students don't seem to know how to cope with family issues, or even how to be a part of a family. Many seem unprepared for daily living and future (or current) parenting responsibilities. Because many of us live within dysfunctional families, high school could be a place to help prepare students for future family roles. Soon many of us will marry and have children. Actually, many students are parents now and have received little education or support from schools on how to handle this responsibility.

SELF-CARE AND SELF-ESTEEM

7. Many students don't know about taking care of themselves—how to eat right and the importance of exercise. To be successful, we need to take care of ourselves, which helps us develop self-esteem and pride. This is part of what everyone needs to be successful.

   - Courses should be offered that teach us skills for caring for ourselves and others. We definitely could use courses on nutrition and health education.

   - Self-care and self-esteem are based on a positive attitude. Positive attitudes can be developed (and reinforced) in part through encouragement from parents, teachers, and administrators. Students get so much from it: confidence, motivation, and the ability to be prepared for school each day and eventually be prepared for the workforce.

SUCCESS IS...

8. We view success in many different ways. Some see it as having money, fast

cars, and fashionable clothing, while others think success is being satisfied with a particular job and, in general, being happy with life.

- If we experience even little pieces of success, then we'll know that we are capable of achieving even bigger goals. We need to have some successes to prove to ourselves and others that we are okay and that we will keep having successes in our lives.

- To be successful you have to be dependable and responsible. People are depended on to fulfill promises, family needs, and work responsibilities. Students need to be convinced that dependability will lead to a good job, which will lead to better pay, and which (in the minds of many students) will lead to success.

- Success is knowing when to be a leader and when to be a follower.

- Success is a good attitude.

- Success is having a good education that will lead to getting and keeping a good job.

INVOLVE ADMINISTRATION DIRECTLY WITH STUDENTS

9. School administrators need to be more involved with day-to-day activities of students and demonstrate that they really care about our education and well-being.

- We would like to see administration support disciplinary actions more strongly. Students get away with too much too easily. Disruptive behavior seems to carry few consequences.

- It would be great to have school principals more involved in supervision, for example, by spending time in the hallways, lunchroom, and classrooms so they can see what is really going on in the school for which they are responsible.

TEACHERS WHO WANT TO TEACH

10. We want better teachers, who are well-educated, genuinely interested in teaching, and who really care about students.

- Teachers today need to be more sensitive to student needs and should try to get to know us. We want teachers who are willing to help us and work on creating good teacher-student relationships.

- Why is it so difficult to fire teachers who do such a poor job? The tenure system and the way of measuring teacher performance should be changed. Students should have input in the assessment of teachers. After all, who knows better than the student how well a teacher teaches!

- We want teachers who know how to motivate us! We don't have to have Robin Williams, as in the movie "Dead Poet's Society," but it would be refreshing to have an enthusiastic teacher, someone who shows interest in students and in the subject every time they walk into the classroom. Why shouldn't teachers expect that we can succeed? Why shouldn't they try to challenge us?

"After all, who knows better than the student how well a teacher is teaching!"

- Teachers need to be aware of their own teaching style and try to match it to the learning styles of students. They need to think about the students and how best to approach us, and have a positive philosophy of teaching and learning. We want teachers who project a positive image and believe in quality teaching.

- Teachers should have well-planned daily lessons and know ahead of time what will be happening on any given day during class. Teachers should design their own tests, rather than using a book company's prepared one. With their own test questions, teachers would better control the information they are testing.

KEEPING UP WITH TECHNOLOGY

11. Many school buildings are old and decrepit, stuffy, and uncomfortable. Our textbooks were written when our parents were teenagers. We need modern, safe buildings, current textbooks, and up-to-date technologies in our schools!

- It's horrible having to sit for hours each day in a room that is too hot and has

no air conditioning or windows. Schools should be built to be usable. Students concentrate better when they are somewhat comfortable.

DEPENDING ON OTHERS

12. We need to count on and look up to adults, such as parents, teachers, clergy, and counselors. But sometimes the adults are still trying to figure out who they are or what they want to be when they grow up.

- Each student has a need, whether he or she knows it or not, to have a mentor. We all need someone who will offer positive reinforcement and guide us in the right direction. This person should also be able to tell the student, in a kind way, when a mistake has been made, and perhaps offer suggestions for improvement.

"We all need someone who will offer us positive reinforcement and guide us in the right direction."

- Students of today are counting on politicians to live up to their campaign promises and to satisfy voters' expectations. Local representatives need to understand how they can help the youth of today and then act on their knowledge. Many students are depending on the President of the United States to help improve the economy. Hopefully, in a better economy we all may find jobs to earn money for college tuition and other educational programs.

SUMMARY

As stated above, the work team sessions demonstrated the importance of certain issues in the outlooks of students and adults who work with them. To review, the major themes are:

1. Economic growth and occupational outlook
2. Academic and occupational choices

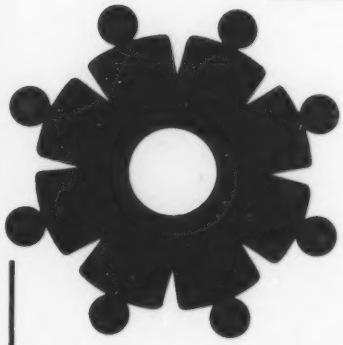
3. Need for real-life applicable choices
4. Need for basic skills and want of transferrable skills
5. Concern about social issues and other problems
6. Family living
7. Self-care and self-esteem
8. Defining success
9. Direct involvement of administration with students
10. Teachers who want to teach
11. Keeping up with technology
12. Depending on others

These themes parallel those of the town meeting held during the summer of 1988 that addressed, "What do students need and want?" That meeting, with students, parents, teachers, administrators, counselors, and community and industry representatives, revealed eight primary wants and needs of students:

1. Visions for fitting into a scary and unknown future
2. Relevant learning
3. Ability to try a variety of things without risk of permanent "failure" label
4. Contact with mature adults who offer caring and trusting relationships
5. Safe and caring settings to talk about important experiences
6. Options in ways of learning and meeting special needs
7. Effective ways to consider choices
8. Specific valuable skill

Themes expressed in both the 1988 and 1993 town meetings reflect anxieties about student preparation for the known and unknown future demands of employers. Other similarities include the desire of students to learn a diversity of applicable skills through state of the art resources and technology. Concerns over family living were prominent in all sessions. In both years students expressed a need for mature, perceptive, and caring teachers and mentors.

In 1988 the questions directed to the students inquired specifically into their view of relationships with peers, teachers and other influential adults. The 1993 participants responded to a specific question about success, and expressed a variety of notions about what success means. Furthermore, in 1993 more emphasis was placed on the quality of schools—regarding materials, classroom environment, and teachers.



The logo of the State Council on Vocational Technical Education is an abstract representation of the citizen-councilors assembled at a round table. Designed by a commercial art student at Alexandria Technical College, the design was selected in 1982 from 69 entries submitted by vocational students in Minnesota's high schools, secondary cooperative centers, and technical colleges. The Council made its selection on the basis of a recommendation by a panel of representatives from the graphic arts, public relations, and media industries in Minnesota.

Purpose of the Council

The State Council on Vocational Technical Education is designed to further public-private collaboration for the advancement of quality vocational programs responsive to labor market needs. Established in 1969 and designated as a state agency in 1985, the Council comprises 13 members appointed by the Governor. Seven members represent the private sector interests of agriculture, business, industry, and labor. Six of the members represent vocational technical education institutions, career guidance and counseling organizations, special education, and targeted populations.

The Council advises the Governor, the State Board of Technical Colleges, the State Board of Education, the Governor's Job Training Council, the business community, the general public, and the U.S. Secretaries of Education and Labor. The Council advises on development of the annual state vocational plan; provides consultation on the establishment of program evaluation criteria and state technical committees; analyzes the spending distribution and the availability of vocational programs, services, and activities; reports on the extent to which equity to quality programs is provided targeted populations; recommends procedures to enhance public participation in vocational technical education; recommends improvements that emphasize business and labor concerns; evaluates the delivery systems assisted under the Carl D. Perkins Vocational Education Act and the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA); and advises on policies that the state should pursue to strengthen vocational technical education, as well as initiatives that the private sector could undertake to enhance program modernization.

To enhance effectiveness in gathering information, the Council holds at least one town meeting each year at which the public is encouraged to express its concern about vocational technical education in Minnesota. To enhance its effectiveness in providing information, the Council publishes a quarterly newsletter, an annual directory, and a biennial report. These publications as well as project and activity reports are available to the public.

Information on the date, time, and location of meetings and other activities is available by calling the Council Offices at 612/296-4202.

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